

# ARMS AND THE MOVEMENT

Pacifism equals pacified to this activist

by Peter Gelderloos, from the book *How Nonviolence Protects the State*

I COULD SPEND PLENTY OF TIME talking about the failures of nonviolence. Instead, it may be useful to talk about its supposed successes. Frequently cited examples are India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule, the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the peace movement during the war in Vietnam. Though they have not yet been hailed as a victory, the massive protests in 2003 against the United States' invasion of Iraq also have been applauded by nonviolent activists. In claiming these as victories for nonviolence, however, pacifists have engaged in a pattern of historical manipulation and whitewashing.

In India, the story goes, people led by Mahatma Gandhi built up a massive nonviolent movement over decades and engaged in protest, nonco-operation, economic boycotts, hunger strikes, and other acts of disobedience that made British imperialism unworkable. The movement suffered massacres and responded with a couple of riots, but on the whole, the movement was nonviolent and eventually won independence, providing an undeniable hallmark of pacifist victory.

The actual history is more complicated. Many violent pressures also influenced the British decision to withdraw. The British had lost the ability to maintain colonial power after losing millions of troops and resources during two extremely violent world wars. The armed struggles of Arab and Jewish militants in Palestine from 1945 to 1948 further weakened the British Empire, and these conflicts served as a clear threat of what might result if the Indians gave up civil disobedience to take up arms en masse.

India's resistance to British colonialism included enough militancy that the Gandhian method should be viewed most accurately as one of several competing forms of popular resistance. Pacifists white out those other forms of resistance, ignoring important militant leaders such as Chandrasekhar Azad, who fought in armed struggle against the British colonizers, and revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh, who won mass support for bombings and assassinations as part of a struggle to accomplish the "overthrow of both foreign and Indian capitalism." The pacifist history of India's struggle can-



not make any sense of the fact that Subhas Chandra Bose, the militant candidate, was twice elected president of the Indian National Congress, in 1938 and 1939.

Ultimately, the liberation movement in India failed. The British were not forced out. Under pressure from a diverse resistance, they chose to hand power over to the parts of the resistance they felt would best uphold their interests, shifting from direct colonial rule to neocolonial rule. What kind of victory allows the losing side to dictate the time and manner of the victors' ascendancy? The British continued to fan the flames of religious and ethnic separatism so that India would be divided against itself, prevented from gaining peace and prosperity, and



dependent on military aid and other support from Euro/American states.

Independence from colonial rule has given India more autonomy in a few areas, and it has certainly allowed a handful of Indians to sit in the seats of power. But the exploitation and the commoditization of the commons and of culture have deepened. Moreover, India lost a clear opportunity for meaningful liberation from a foreign oppressor. Any liberation movement now would have to go up against the confounding dynamics of nationalism and ethnic/religious rivalry in order to abolish a domestic capitalism and government that are far more developed.

**THE U.S. CIVIL RIGHTS** movement is one of the most important episodes in pacifist history. Across the world, people see it as an example of non-violent victory. In truth, it was neither nonviolent nor a victory.

On the contrary, though pacifist groups such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference had considerable power and influence, popular support, especially among poor black people, gravitated toward militant revolutionary groups such as the Black Panther Party. According to a 1970 Harris poll, 66 percent of African Americans said the activities of the Black Panther Party gave them pride, and 43 percent said the party represented their own views.

The nonviolent segments of the civil rights movement cannot be distilled and separated from its revolutionary parts. Pacifist, middle-class black activists, including King, got much of their power from the specter of black resistance and the presence of armed black revolutionaries.

To cite one example: In the spring of 1963, King's Birmingham campaign was fixing to be a repeat of the dismally failed action in Albany, Georgia, where a nine-month civil disobedience campaign that began in 1961 had demonstrated the powerlessness of

nonviolent protesters against a government with seemingly bottomless jails. Then, on May 7, after continued police violence in Birmingham, 3,000 black people began fighting back, pelting the police with rocks and bottles. Just two days later, Birmingham—up until then an inflexible bastion of segregation—agreed to desegregate downtown stores, and President Kennedy backed the agreement with federal guarantees.

Within days, after local white supremacists bombed a black home and a black business, thousands of black people rioted again, seizing a nine-block area, destroying police cars, injuring several cops (including the chief inspector), and burning white businesses. Within weeks, Kennedy ended several years of stalling and called for Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act. As King himself said, "The sound of the explosion in Birmingham

average incomes, poorer access to housing and health care, and poorer health than white people. De facto segregation still exists. Political equality is also lacking. Millions of voters, most of them black, are disenfranchised (from voting for white candidates in a white political system that reflects a white culture) when it is convenient to ruling interests, and only three black senators have served since Reconstruction.

**THE CLAIM THAT** the U.S. peace movement ended the war in Vietnam contains the usual set of flaws. With unforgivable self-righteousness, peace activists ignore the fact that 3 million to 5 million Indochinese died in the fight against the U.S. military; tens of thousands of U.S. troops were killed and hundreds of thousands wounded; other troops were demoralized and had become ineffective and openly rebellious; and the United States was losing political capital (and going fiscally bankrupt) to a point where pro-war politicians began calling for a strategic withdrawal.

Some pacifists claim that the huge number of conscientious objectors who refused to fight points to a nonviolent victory. But far more significant than passive conscientious objectors were the active rebellions by black, Latino, and Native American troops. The government's plan, in response to black urban riots, of taking unemployed young black men off the streets and into the military, backfired. Fragging, sabotage, refusal to fight, rioting in the stockades, and aiding the enemy contributed significantly to the decision to pull out ground troops. The Pentagon estimated that 3 percent of officers and noncommissioned officers killed in Vietnam from 1961 to 1972 were killed by their own troops. In many instances, soldiers in a unit pooled their money to raise a bounty for the killing of an unpopular officer.

"By every conceivable indicator,



reached all the way to Washington."

In short, the largest victory of the civil rights movement came when black people demonstrated that they would not remain peaceful forever. Faced with the two alternatives, the white power structure chose to negotiate with the pacifists, and we have seen the results: The movement was successful in ending de jure segregation and expanding the minuscule black petty bourgeoisie, but fell far short of full political and economic equality, to say nothing of black liberation from white imperialism. People of color still have lower

our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse," wrote Marine Corps Colonel Robert D. Heinl in the *Armed Forces Journal* in June 1971, "with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden and dispirited where not near mutinous. Elsewhere than Vietnam, the situation is nearly as serious."

Although they were less politically significant than resistance from within the military, bombings and other acts of violence in protest of the war on white college campuses should not be ignored in favor of the pacifist whitewash. In the 1969-70 school year (September through May), a conservative estimate counts 174 antiwar bombings on campuses and at least 70 off-campus bombings and other violent attacks targeting ROTC buildings, government buildings, and corporate offices. Additionally, 230 campus protests included physical violence, and 410 included damage to property.

In conclusion, what was a very limited victory—the withdrawal of ground troops after many years of warfare—can be most clearly attributed to two factors: the successful and sustained violent resistance of the Vietnamese, and the militant and often lethal resistance of the U.S. ground troops themselves. The domestic antiwar movement clearly worried those in power, but it had certainly not become powerful enough that we can say it "forced" the government to do anything, and in any case, its most forceful elements used violence.

**PERHAPS CONFUSED** by their own false history of the peace movement during the Vietnam War, pacifist organizers against the invasion of Iraq seemed to expect a repeat of a victory that never happened. On February 16, 2003, as the U.S. government moved toward war with Iraq, Agence France-Presse hailed weekend protests as "a stinging

rebuke to Washington and its allies." The protests were the largest in history; excepting a few minor scuffles, they were entirely nonviolent. United for Peace and Justice and some other antiwar groups even suggested that the protests might avert war.

As we now know, they were totally wrong, and the protests were totally ineffective. The invasion occurred as planned, despite the millions of people nominally, peacefully, and powerlessly opposed to it. The antiwar movement did nothing to change the power relationships in the United States. President Bush received substantial political capital for invading Iraq, and was not faced with a backlash until the war and occupation effort began to show signs of failure due to the effective armed resistance of the Iraqi people.

A good case study regarding the efficacy of nonviolent protest can be seen in Spain's involvement with the U.S.-led occupation. Spain, with 1,300 troops, was one of the larger junior partners in the "Coalition of the Willing." More than a million Spaniards protested the invasion, and 80 percent of the Spanish population was opposed to it, but their commitment to peace ended there; they did nothing to actually prevent Spanish military support for the invasion and occupation. Because they remained passive and did nothing to disempower the leadership, they remained as powerless as the citizens of any democracy. Not only was Prime Minister Aznar allowed to go to war, he was expected by all forecasts to win reelection.

Until the bombings. On March 11, 2004, just days before the voting booths opened, multiple bombs planted by an al-Qaida-linked cell exploded on Madrid trains, killing 191 people and injuring 1,755. Directly because of this, Aznar and his party lost in the polls, and the Socialists, the major party with an antiwar platform, were elected to power. The U.S.-led coalition shrunk

with the loss of the Spanish troops. Whereas millions of peaceful activists voting in the streets like good sheep have not weakened the brutal occupation in any measurable way, a few dozen terrorists willing to slaughter noncombatants were able to cause the withdrawal of more than a thousand occupation troops.

So much for the victories of pacifism.

The Madrid bombings do not present an example for action, but rather, an important paradox: Do people who stick to nonviolent tactics that have not proved effective in ending the war against Iraq really care more for human life than the Madrid terrorists? From India to Birmingham, nonviolence has failed to sufficiently empower its practitioners, whereas the use of a diversity of tactics got results. Put simply, if a movement is not a threat, it cannot change a system that is based on centralized coercion and violence.

Time and again, people struggling not for some token reform but for complete liberation—the reclamation of control over our own lives and the power to negotiate our own relationships with the people and the world around us—will find that nonviolence does not work, that we face a self-perpetuating power structure that is immune to appeals to conscience and strong enough to plow over the disobedient and uncooperative.

We must reclaim histories of resistance to understand why we have failed in the past and how exactly we achieved the limited successes we did. We must also accept that all social struggles, except those carried out by a completely pacified and thus ineffective people, include a diversity of tactics.

Peter Gelderloos is an activist and community organizer who has worked with Food Not Bombs and against the School of the Americas. Excerpted from his book *How Nonviolence Protects the State* (2007), published by South End Press, an independent, collectively run publisher dedicated to the politics of radical social change; [www.southendpress.org](http://www.southendpress.org).

# NOT Your Mother's QUILT

Terese Agnew needles the establishment  
one stitch at a time

by James Diers

**T**erese Agnew has absolutely nothing in common with my 86-year-old grandmother, save for two traits: an aptitude for sewing and a deep devotion to Midwestern hospitality. When I arrive at her Milwaukee home-slash-studio on a snowy morning, Agnew immediately confiscates my coat, gloves, scarf, and boots and strategically arranges them around a warm radiator. "Can I get you some coffee? Some tea?" she asks. Over the course of one visit, her offerings include cranberry-walnut toast, homemade soup, a compact fluorescent lightbulb ("You haven't tried these? Take one!"), and a backup supply of windshield washer fluid for the slushy drive home. Grandma herself could hardly be more gracious.

But unlike Grandma, the 47-year-old Agnew wields these homespun kindnesses alongside a worldly set of sociopolitical perspectives, activist ideals, and a reputation as one of America's most important fabric artists. One of her quilts hangs in the Smithsonian, and she's widely known—both inside and outside contemporary art circles—for *Portrait of a Textile Worker*, an eight-by-nine-foot

quilt depicting a young Bangladeshi sweatshop employee, created by stitching together more than 30,000 tiny designer clothing labels that were gathered in a donation campaign. By the artist's own account, *Textile Worker* is the best work she's ever done. "I think process and materials have everything to do with the subject," she says. "It was just one of those moments where everything came together perfectly."

Since being unveiled in early 2005, *Textile Worker* has made indelible impressions on viewers of all political stripes, not only for its symbolic content, but also for its mind-bending display of public participation and painstaking craft. Two years later, thanks to an impressive grassroots fund-raising campaign by longtime Agnew supporters, labor groups, and private donors, the piece has been officially acquired by the Museum of Art and Design in New York.

Ironically for the artist, this newfound renown comes at a time when Agnew's hands-on crafting has come to a halt. Last year, she suffered a repetitive stress injury, forcing her to take an extended break from needle-and-thread.